

Race and Politics in Twentieth-Century Alabama

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My qualifications

I am a Professor of History at the University of Alabama. My area of expertise is twentieth century American history with a particular focus on the history of the South. I earned my Ph.D. from Rutgers University in 1996. I began my career at the University of Central Florida and have been at the University of Alabama since 1999. Since becoming a professional historian I have taught undergraduate and graduate courses on U.S. history, the history of the American South, the Civil Rights Movement, American political history since the 1960s, and Alabama history. I have supervised more than 30 Masters students and 15 doctoral students. I have conducted research at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, and at state and university archives across the South. I currently serve on the Board of Directors of the Harry S. Truman Library Institute and am chairperson of the Institute's Research Grants Committee.

To date I have published four books with highly regarded academic presses. My scholarship focuses on the political, social, and cultural history of the twentieth-century South. *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968*, was published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2001 and won the Harry S. Truman Book Award in 2002. *Cold War Dixie: Militarization and Modernization in the American South* was published by the University of Georgia Press in 2013 and won the Southern Historical Association's Bennett H. Wall Prize for the Best Book in Southern Economic History in 2014. My latest book, *Deep South Dynasty: The Bankheads of Alabama*, was published by the University of Alabama Press in 2022 and won the Gulf South Historical Association's Michael V. R. Thomason Award for the Best Book on the Gulf South. I have published an additional 19 scholarly articles and essays in peer-reviewed publications. I have served as a consultant and on-camera expert for six documentaries, most

recently for *The Blinding of Isaac Woodard*, part of PBS's prestigious American Experience series. I was awarded a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and have served as a member of the NEH's grants review committee.

Method of Report

The following report is based on research in a wide range of primary and secondary sources in the political history of Alabama and the South. I have conducted research in relevant gubernatorial papers and in the State Democratic Executive Committee Papers held at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, as well as relevant state and local newspapers. I have consulted more than forty scholarly books and articles on political development in Alabama and the South.

Summary of My Opinion

Race has served as a dividing line in political allegiance and activity since the period of Reconstruction. In particular, the ability of first the Democratic Party and later, the Republican Party, to achieve viability and dominance has depended on each party's ability to secure the support of white voters through racial appeals. The Democratic Party succeeded in establishing itself as the defender of white supremacy following the disfranchisement campaign of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, and through the leveraging of cultural symbols and historical memory. From the 1920s through roughly the 1960s, southern Democrats achieved seniority in the national party, which allowed them to protect white racial customs and made them almost impossible to challenge. The Republican Party overcame considerable hostility and gained relevancy, competitiveness, and ultimately dominance in Alabama by branding itself the "white party" as the Civil Rights Movement gained traction locally and garnered support from the

National Democratic Party. The Republican Party's ability to exploit white racial anxiety beginning in the early 1960s and later, in the 1980s, by developing conservative policy positions with race at the center, allowed it to attract a growing number of white voters, first at the presidential level, and later in down-ballot races. It also successfully appropriated cultural symbols and utilized historical memory that at one time had been the sole possession of the Democrats. Today, the parties are racially polarized; most whites are Republicans and most Blacks are Democrats. With white identity politics occupying the center of Republican politics, creating effective and enduring bi-racial coalitions is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Introduction

For the breadth of the twentieth century, political party identity in the State of Alabama has been largely defined by race. The Democratic Party's disfranchisement campaign at the turn of the century and its dedication to the maintenance of white supremacy through a variety of means secured its dominance in Alabama for much of the twentieth century. The resurgence and competitiveness of the Republican Party in national and state elections beginning in the mid-1960s depended heavily on the party's ability to define itself as the "white man's" party. With race as the primary political dividing line throughout much of the century, creating bi-racial coalitions – whether overtly political or not -- was nearly impossible and actively resisted.

Disfranchisement

Democratic Party dominance in Alabama was achieved at the turn of the twentieth century through the promotion of a political message that emphasized the protection of white supremacy and through a new constitution that eliminated political competition from the

Republican Party and from disgruntled white Democrats unhappy with the state party by disfranchising the mass of Black voters and many poor white voters.

White voters' hostility toward the Republican Party began prior to the Civil War but really took root during the period known as Radical Reconstruction, roughly 1868-1874. The Republican Party held majority power in Congress from 1868 to 1872, and was responsible for passage of the 14th amendment, which established citizenship rights for all persons born in the United States, and the 15th amendment, which forbade states from denying citizens the right to vote based on race. During the period of Radical Reconstruction, freedmen in Alabama became registered voters, participated in a biracial Republican Party, and held political office. The Democratic Party became identified with the return of white supremacy, and Democrats used a variety of means – primarily fraud and violence – to intimidate Republican voters and regain control of state government in 1874. Despite the continuation of these intimidation methods, Republican voters, both Black and white, continued to participate in state and national politics, posing a persistent threat to the Democratic Party.¹

The 1901 constitution incorporated multiple suffrage obstacles that were devastatingly effective, particularly in the state's majority Black counties. In 1900, before the new requirements went into effect, and despite decades of fraud and intimidation, some 79,311 Black voters appeared on the rolls in fourteen Black Belt counties. Once the constitution went into effect, barely over a thousand remained. Statewide, by 1908, Alabama counted a mere 3,742 registered Black voters. Although not quite as dramatic as the losses incurred by Black voters, voter registration among poor white Alabamians suffered a decline that increased with the passage of time. By 1942, Alabama had only 440,291 registered voters but some six hundred thousand disfranchised white people.² The strongest deterrent to white registration was the poll

tax. With these voters essentially silenced, the threat of political rebellion grounded in shared economic grievance was eliminated. The era of ballot stuffing came to an end, and any hope of a political coalition made up of Black and poor white voters grounded in economic concerns was dealt a severe blow.

As a consequence of disfranchisement, the State of Alabama and much of the South became a one-party region. Unchallenged by Republicans, Democratic officeholders easily won re-election, gaining seniority in the House of Representatives and the Senate. During periods in which Democrats were in the majority, especially beginning in 1932, seniority brought committee chairmanships and extraordinary power to kill any legislation that threatened white supremacy. Although southern congressmen and senators might disagree on matters of economic or foreign policy, on issues of race, they voted as a block and maintained extraordinary unanimity. The Democratic Party, whose official symbol from 1904 to 1966 featured a rooster and the slogan “White Supremacy, For the Right,” reigned supreme in Alabama for the next eighty years.

Democratic Party and Culture

Achieving political hegemony was as much a cultural as a political battle. Having established their political hegemony through disfranchisement, white Democrats had to legitimize their continued control. The dominance and legitimacy of the Democratic Party drew strength from historical memory, giving the party a cultural power that exceeded that of a typical political party and made creating anything resembling a coalition to challenge its rule nearly impossible. In addition to creating constitutional barriers to electoral participation, white Democrats crafted a strong cultural narrative about the superiority of the Democratic Party and the corresponding illegitimacy of the Republican Party.

Democrats established their legitimacy as the ruling party by creating a particular interpretation of the southern past and the southern present that made a virtue of white elite Democratic rule. denigrated Black culture, perpetuated a fear and hatred of Black political participation and the Republican Party, and taught reverence for the antebellum South and the Confederacy. The antebellum South and Confederacy, and the Democratic Party, were commemorated through the erection of monuments; through public lectures and celebrations; through the publication, circulation, and adoption in public schools of approved works of fiction and history; and through the creation of state cultural institutions such as the Alabama Department of Archives and History. Thomas McAdory Owen and Marie Bankhead Owen, directors of the archives for over fifty years and both children of Confederate veterans, made it their mission to erase Republican contributions from history. Tom Owen refused to collect or subsequently destroyed any Reconstruction-era manuscript collections that documented Republican contributions.³

Marie Bankhead Owen's greatest victory in her quest to purge any hint of Republicanism from Alabama's public face came in her campaign to change the state seal and the state motto in the 1930s. In 1868, the Republican legislature elected during Radical Reconstruction created a state seal. This particular legislature was dominated by the Republican Party, which was comprised of white and Black lawmakers. For Bankhead Owen, this 1868 seal was a "monstrosity"; the Radical Reconstruction legislature that created it was politically illegitimate, having been created by "the Carpetbag Legislature, made up of men who were strangers to our traditions, and in the main of local renegades and negroes." She also created a new state motto: "We Dare Defend Our Rights," a declaration of the rights of states to defend themselves against the tyranny of federal power.⁴ Given her antipathy for the period of Radical Reconstruction, and

in particular that era's biracial legislatures' support for the 14th and 15th amendments, the "rights" she sought to "defend" were the right of whites to police race relations without federal interference. In 1939, the state legislature adopted the new seal and motto designed by Bankhead Owen. They remain Alabama state symbols more than eighty years later.

Redistricting in 1916

Disfranchisement, although devastating, still did not completely eliminate Republican voting. In counties such as Walker, Fayette, and Winston, the Republican Party maintained a pesky presence. A persistent minority was not to be tolerated, and the Democrats sought other means to further eviscerate Republican power. Congressional redistricting provided another tool through which to further undermine Republican Party viability. Democrats found their opportunity following the 1910 census; Alabama's population growth had earned it an additional congressional representative. For the 1912 and 1914 legislative sessions, a stopgap measure had been instituted, and the seat had been filled by election of a congressman-at-large. A permanent redistricting of the state needed to be undertaken. John Bankhead Jr. of Jasper, son of a United States congressman and author of the enabling legislation that activated the voting obstacles in the 1901 Constitution, drafted the initial legislation creating the new Tenth District. Comprising Fayette, Franklin, Lamar, Marion, Pickens, Walker, and Winston, the Tenth would take four counties from the Sixth, two from the Seventh, and one from the Ninth. Bankhead and the bill's supporters in the state legislature were transparent about their partisan goals: the creation of the new district would help Democratic candidates in the Seventh Congressional District by siphoning off some Republican voters. The bill to create the new Tenth District would dilute this Republican strength and thus make all Alabama congressional districts safely Democratic. Doing so would protect white supremacy. This was something upon which all Democrats could agree.

The bill passed by a razor thin margin on the last day of the legislative session in September 1915.⁵

1928 Bolt and Heflin

The Democratic Party not only implemented measures by which to dilute and eliminate competition from Republicans. It sought to punish individual Democrats who supported Republican candidates. Any deviation from Democratic Party allegiance was deemed a threat to the maintenance of white supremacy. White Democrats who abandoned the Democratic Party to support a Republican candidate during any given election could expect punishment regardless of the individual's white supremacist credentials.

The greatest threat to Democratic party hegemony came in 1928, when the National Democratic Party nominated New York Governor Alfred E. Smith as its presidential candidate. Smith was an Irish Catholic and a foe of prohibition and supported repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. Protestant leaders across the South expressed fear of Smith's candidacy; many wondered whether cultural and religious concerns might trump race in this campaign, leading some white southern voters to abandon the Democratic candidate to support the hated Republicans and their popular candidate Herbert Hoover.

The anti-Smith forces in Alabama were led by United States Senator J. Thomas Heflin. Nicknamed "Cotton Tom" for his advocacy on behalf of the state's cotton farmers. Heflin was one of the more colorful politicians of that or any time. Elected to Congress in 1904, Heflin served eight terms in the House and won election to the U.S. Senate in 1920. Heflin was best known for his strident anti-Catholicism, his support of prohibition, and his virulent white supremacy. Repulsed by Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith, Heflin embarked on a full-

fledged political revolt, determined to swing the state to Republican nominee Herbert Hoover. calling Smith a “Negro bootlicker” who favored interracial marriage. Heflin further charged that the New York governor had appointed African Americans to government jobs, giving them supervisory power over white female employees. Speaking in the city of Dothan in October 1928, Heflin painted Smith as the harbinger of a racial apocalypse, claiming that Smith “is in favor of appointing negroes to office where they will be in authority over white people” and declaring that “there are now dance halls in New York City...where every night negro men dance with white women and white men dance with negro women.” Alarmed by Heflin’s bolt, the state Democratic Party countered with an attack of their own, depicting Hoover as a supporter of racial equality and reminding white Democratic voters of the tragedy of Reconstruction, when carpetbaggers invaded the South and freedmen served in the legislature. A vote for Herbert Hoover, they cried, meant a return to Black domination.

The turnout for the 1928 presidential election was one of the largest in Alabama history. Ultimately, party loyalty, cultural antipathy towards the Republican Party, and the Democrats’ history of protecting white supremacy trumped religious bigotry and fear of revocation of the Eighteenth Amendment, but just barely. Al Smith carried Alabama by a mere seven thousand votes; roughly one hundred thousand Alabama Democrats voted for Herbert Hoover. For many white voters, it was their first time supporting a Republican. Despite the fact that Hoover had lost, Senator Tom Heflin, whose support for white supremacy was nearly unparalleled, paid a political price for abandoning the Democrats and making common cause with the Republicans. Party loyalty was a serious matter. Up for re-election in 1930, Heflin was barred by the State Democratic Executive Committee from running as a Democrat. Denied the powerful Democratic Party affiliation, Heflin attempted to create a coalition of disgruntled Democrats and

Republicans but ultimately lost the election to John Bankhead Jr. His political career never recovered.

Biracial coalitions, Part I: Organized Labor

The severe prohibition against political coalitions that threatened white supremacy extended beyond politics to broader Alabama society. Difficult economic conditions that hit both white and Black at times precipitated the creation of biracial coalitions to address challenging circumstances. Time after time, these coalitions were attacked by the political and economic elite who saw in such coalitions a threat to white supremacy as well as to profits.

The growth of industry in Alabama in the postbellum era was predicated upon a racially stratified labor force. An industrial workforce divided by race gave owners a powerful tool to keep wages low. The often-violent backlash against the organizing of Black and white laborers in particular into labor unions made the potential for a political coalition based on shared economic grievance highly unlikely. The defense of white supremacist ideology, politics, and social practices undermined and outright sought to destroy interracial coalitions.

The rise of the steel industry, and the mining of the coal and iron ore on which it depended, brought waves of black and white migrants to the area around Birmingham in search of better wages and relief from rural poverty. Early on, a mixed workforce began to emerge in the Birmingham District. By 1900, more than half of the mining workforce in the Birmingham coal fields was Black. Alabama's competitive edge hinged on coal operators' ability to keep wages low. Despite deep cleavages between white and black miners, the history of the industry illustrates moments when the two groups made nearly heroic attempts to unify to address extremely harsh working conditions and low pay, only to be undermined and destroyed by the

power of capital, often assisted by the military power of the state. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) made repeated efforts in the Alabama coalfields to galvanize interracial unity in pursuit of better working conditions and higher pay. Alabama's miners affiliated with the UMWA in April 1890, becoming known as UMW District 20.

By 1903, the UMWA had more than 95 locals and 14,000 members in District 20. After coal operators cut their wages in 1908, UMWA miners – Black and white -- went on strike. The two-month strike was marked by armed confrontations between striking miners and guards employed by the coal companies. Prominent mine owners excoriated the union's biracial composition, encouraged white citizens to take vigilante action against the members of the union, and appealed to Governor Braxton Bragg Comer to lend military assistance to the owners in putting down the strike. After two months of violent labor confrontations, Governor Comer mobilized the Alabama National Guard to break the strike. Coal miners went on strike again, this time to protest the rollback of wage and other gains achieved during World War I. Once again, the governor (this time, Thomas Kilby) used troops to break the strike.⁶

Biracial coalitions, Part II: Great Depression: Southern Conference for Human Welfare

The conditions that befell white and Black Alabamians during the Great Depression once again provided a context within which some sought to create coalitions to address the state's and region's needs. One such coalition was the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW). Founded in 1938, the SCHW was a coalition of groups and individuals interested in expanding New Deal-style reforms in the South to accelerate economic recovery while also opening the door to democratic reforms. Drawing support from organized labor, civil rights organizations, and a few traditional Democratic political leaders, the SCHW held its inaugural meeting in Birmingham in 1938. Roughly one-quarter of the delegates who attended the three-day meeting

were Black. The organization's support for interracial labor organizing, such as that undertaken by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), as well as its opposition to the poll tax made the SCHW a target of mainstream politicians in Alabama and throughout the South. Although members of the Communist Party participated in the SCHW, the organization was by no means a communist organization. Nevertheless, the organization's refusal to take a staunch anti-communist stance in the post-war era made it vulnerable to anti-communist attacks. The organization folded in 1948.

Turning point: World War II

The onset of World War II precipitated changes in Alabama and across the region that put increasing pressure on those dedicated to maintaining white supremacy. Massive numbers of Black southerners migrated north and west in search of wartime employment. Once settled in their new communities, these new residents became registered voters. The Great Depression and the Democratic Party's New Deal had prompted Black voters (even those few in the South) to support the Democratic Party after decades of support for the party of Lincoln. "The switch was abrupt. In 1932 Roosevelt received only 23 percent of the Black vote; in 1936 he received 71 percent."⁷ Now, with significant growth of Black voters in the North, for the first time in the twentieth century, civil rights moved onto the agendas of both national political parties eager to win these new voters, and African American veterans returned home determined to fight for democracy in their communities.

The most direct assault on the region's anti-democratic political machinery came from the United States Supreme Court in its 1944 decision in the Texas case of Smith v. Allwright. The court ruled that the Texas white primary law violated the Fifteenth Amendment and was therefore unconstitutional. While the states of the Upper South acquiesced in the ruling, the

decision was a political bombshell in the Deep South, where white Democrats scrambled to shore up the political barriers to Black voting. Alabama's governor, Frank Dixon, wrote of his concern to the head of the state Democratic Party. "It is obvious that the only thing that has held the Democratic Party together in the South for many years past has been the thing which caused its strength in the first place, namely, white supremacy." If the national Democratic Party followed the Supreme Court's lead "through forced registration of negroes in the State, the Democratic Party will become anathema to the white people in the South."⁸ State senator and U.S. Senate candidate James Simpson regarded the *Smith* decision as "the gravest threat to white supremacy since Reconstruction"⁹ The *Smith* decision and service in the war for democracy galvanized groups of Black voters in Alabama. Determined to stifle Black political participation, in 1946 the Alabama legislature passed, and voters approved, the Boswell Amendment to the state constitution. This amendment introduced new suffrage standards that required potential voters to "read and write, understand and explain any article of the Constitution of the United States" and granted local boards the power to administer registration requirements "in as discriminatory a fashion as they saw fit."¹⁰

Southern Democrats' unanimity on issues of race and their immense power in Congress allowed them to kill any legislation that threatened white supremacy.¹¹ But that stranglehold was starting to loosen ever so slightly in the late 1940s. The recent war for democracy, the growth of an increasingly vocal Black citizenry in northern cities, the mobilization of Black southern voters, and a rash of violence against Black veterans across the South in the postwar era emboldened President Harry Truman to challenge the power of Southern Democrats to dictate the party's allegiance to white supremacy. In February 1948, during an election year, Truman submitted a civil rights package to Congress that included anti-poll tax and anti-lynching

legislation, as well as a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission that would make employment discrimination illegal. Truman expected an outcry from southern white Democrats but predicted that white southerners' historic allegiance to the party would win out, and that they would ultimately support him in the presidential election in November.

He was wrong. A group of southern Democrats – apoplectic at the thought that the party that had for so long served as the protector of white supremacy was now pursuing Black voters -- staged a political revolt. Unsuccessful in preventing a civil rights plank in the Democratic party platform and in denying Truman the Democratic party's nomination, this group of disgruntled white Democrats created their own party to challenge the Democrats and Republicans in November and to protect white supremacy. Its official name was the States' Rights Democratic Party, but it was more popularly known as the Dixiecrats. Alabama was among the strongest Dixiecrat states, with former Governor Frank Dixon, state party chair Gessner McCorvey, and attorney and political insider Horace Wilkinson as its most vocal leaders. McCorvey pledged to defeat Truman's "damnable, obnoxious, and unthinkable" civil rights program.¹² Others compared Truman's program to the dark days of Reconstruction, when "federal bayonets...[forced] the negro down our throats." Horace Wilkinson was more blunt: if southern Democrats submitted to Truman's wishes, they might as well "haul down the Democratic flag [and] submit to nigger rule."¹³ The Dixiecrats succeeded in hijacking the state party and running the Dixiecrat presidential and vice-presidential candidates under the "Democratic Party" label. The Dixiecrats also appropriated "the most powerful cultural symbols associated with" the Confederacy, including the Confederate battle flag and portraits of Confederate heroes.¹⁴ Democrats were forced to list President Truman and his running mate on the ballot as the nominees of the "National Democratic Party." Alabama's governor, James Folsom, its two

Senators, and its entire Congressional delegation remained loyal to the president; but that loyalty did not mean they supported Truman's civil rights program. Rather, they supported the national nominee because they believed Alabama (and the South's) continued allegiance to the Democratic Party remained the surest way to defeat any civil rights proposals. Although the Dixiecrat effort was defeated, the 1948 political bolt was a turning point for some white southerners as they began to question their historic allegiance to the Democratic Party as the best vehicle through which to preserve white supremacy.

Following the 1948 presidential election, politics in Alabama and across the South entered into a long transitional period in which the right to claim the mantle of the defender of white supremacy shifted slowly from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. This shift occurred first at the presidential election level, and voters – particularly white voters – in Alabama adhered to this shift primarily in national elections over the next thirty years. Although it had been possible to support the economic liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal while maintaining support for segregation and white supremacy, Truman's civil rights program (although ultimately defeated in Congress) incorporated racial liberalism into the national party's profile that only grew more intertwined in the coming decades; by the 1980s, "liberalism" had become anathema to southern white voters. According to one historian, "the word could not be uttered in an economic sense without also conjuring the culturally fatal albatross of racial inclusion."¹⁵

In the immediate aftermath of the 1948 election, the Democratic Party in Alabama sought to reclaim its reputation as the best vehicle through which to protect white supremacy.¹⁶ Hence it sought to eliminate the possibility of a future Dixiecrat-like bolt. In 1951, the state Party passed a loyalty oath that effectively made a repeat of the Dixiecrat Revolt in 1952 an impossibility. With

another hijacking of the Democratic Party machinery now off the table, prominent Dixiecrats in the state looked for other party options, among them, the dreaded Republican Party. Birmingham columnist and Dixiecrat supporter John Temple Graves told a gathering of former Democrats, “Let us not wince anymore when we hear the word Republican.”¹⁷ Abandoning the Democratic Party, with its historic allegiance to the defense of white supremacy, would take some time.

The 1950s: A Period of Transition

Despite President Truman’s embrace of civil rights, the majority of white southern voters remained in the Democratic column. As of 1950, not a single Senator from the South was a Republican, and only 2 out of 105 southern members of Congress were Republicans. The party’s prospects for the South improved when, after 1948, the Republican party began to lose favor with Black voters. This realization prompted some Republicans to look to the South, which the national party had neglected for generations.¹⁸ Aware of a potentially significant independent white southern vote, the national Republican Party welcomed the disgruntled Dixiecrats. At a Lincoln Day rally of Alabama Republicans in Birmingham in early February, Republican National Chairman Guy Gabrielson made a strong pitch to win Alabama Dixiecrats over to the GOP. Gabrielson declared, “We want the Dixiecrats to vote for our candidate. The Dixiecrat movement is an anti-Truman movement. The Dixiecrat party believes in states’ rights. That’s what the Republican party believes in.”¹⁹

In 1952, the national Democratic Party nominated Illinois senator Adlai Stevenson and U.S. Senator from Alabama John Sparkman as its presidential and vice-presidential candidates in 1952. The party’s platform contained a much weaker civil rights platform than it had in 1948; furthermore, many Alabama Dixiecrats recognized the futility of opposing a Democratic ticket that carried the state’s own Senator. Still, having made the break in 1948, many former

Dixiecrats could not go back. Several threw their lot in with Republicans. Tom Abernethy of Talladega, a 1948 Dixiecrat elector and 1950 States' Rights campaign chairperson, resigned his position on the State Democratic Executive Committee in July and stumped the state for Republican candidate Eisenhower. A number of other influential Dixiecrats eventually threw their support to the general, including state chairman Gessner McCorvey, textile magnate Donald Comer, Dothan banker Wallace Malone, and Montgomery construction king Winton M. Blount, who would later serve as Richard Nixon's postmaster general. Despite the desire to create new in-roads into Alabama and the other southern states, the national Republican Party reflected Eisenhower's relatively moderate position on civil rights during the 1950s. Eisenhower captured several upper South states and did well with middle- and upper-class white voters in the region's metropolitan areas in 1952 and 1956, but his victories did not have much in the way of coattails.²⁰

During Eisenhower's presidency, the Republican Party focused more intently on forging inroads into the South. It created a "Southern Division" to begin the long process of party-building in the region. Prior to the 1950s, the Republican Party was simply a patronage machine with very little institutional presence in Alabama or elsewhere. According to one observer, prior to the 1960s, the Republican Party in the South "operated from briefcases and transient filing cabinets..."²² With a slightly more robust party machinery, 1960 Republican Party presidential candidate Richard Nixon hoped to build upon Eisenhower's toehold in the region. Nixon possessed a stronger commitment to racial equality than had Eisenhower, but he kept it relatively muted during the campaign and the party adopted a civil rights plank that was weaker than its Democratic counterpart. The shedding of Black voters that had begun in 1948 accelerated. Nixon adopted rhetoric that was familiar to white southerners, affirming that the Republican Party stood

for states' rights; he also mostly avoided mentioning the most famous of Republicans, Abraham Lincoln. Nixon hoped to expand upon Eisenhower's gains in southern metropolitan areas among what were referred to as "country-club Republicans," and was aided in his quest for white southern votes by southern middlemen like Birmingham newspaperman John Temple Graves, who now saw the Republican Party as the best vehicle through which to preserve segregation and white political control.

Despite a stronger party apparatus, Nixon was unable to build upon Eisenhower's record in the South. He carried Florida, Tennessee and Virginia. He was not racially conservative enough to convince a sufficient number of southern white voters in the Deep South to abandon their historic conceptions of the parties. The Republicans also failed to add any additional House seats. Nixon did worse with Black voters than did Eisenhower, winning 32% to Eisenhower's 39%, further convincing some in the party that its future lay with white southern voters. Alabama voters stuck with the Democratic Party in part because of the presence of Texan Lyndon Johnson on the ticket; still, a sufficient number of voters were unhappy with the party's position on civil rights to choose six unpledged presidential electors.²³

The Republican Party's Right Turn: Becoming the White Party

Following Nixon's defeat, conservative Republicans, a small but increasingly vocal and determined group, argued that the party needed to focus more aggressively on white voters in the South. United States Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, champion of this emerging conservative wing of the party, argued that Nixon's moderate approach to civil rights would continue to be a losing approach. The party's future, Goldwater argued, lay with white voters in the South. At a meeting of southern Republicans shortly following Nixon's defeat, Goldwater famously declared, "We're not going to get the Negro vote as a bloc in 1964 and 1968, so we

ought to go hunting where the ducks are.”²⁴ Following Goldwater’s advice, the RNC devoted roughly a third of its annual budget to southern organizing. Within a few years, the party had a presence in 87 percent of southern counties, and many of these new Republicans were staunch segregationists.²⁵ The Republican Party had made a deliberate decision to brand itself as a “white party,” focusing its publicity activities on white voters in the South.²⁶

1962 Hill-Martin Race: A Response to Civil Rights

The Republican Party began making in-roads with white voters in Alabama and the South in the early 1960s as the Civil Rights Movement began gaining traction. The Kennedy administration proved more willing than the previous administration to aid the burgeoning movement, supporting the anti-poll tax amendment, helping to protect the Freedom Riders in Alabama, and aiding in the integration of the University of Mississippi. In 1962, the Republican Party fielded candidates in 7 US Senate races and 113 House races in the South.²⁷

The first serious challenge from a Republican candidate in Alabama came in 1962 when Gadsden businessman James D. Martin challenged incumbent United States Senator Lister Hill.²⁸ Elected to the House of Representatives in 1923 and to the United States Senate in 1938, Hill distinguished himself first as a staunch New Deal Democrat and later as an advocate for expanded access to health care. Hill was a pro-segregationist Democratic loyalist who opposed the Dixiecrat revolt, viewing the seniority of southern senators and representatives within the Democratic Party as the surest way to defeat civil rights legislation. Martin was a political unknown, a free-enterprise Dixiecrat-turned-“Goldwater Republican” who was an economic and racial conservative. He opposed federal civil rights initiatives and regarded programs such as national aid to education and social security as programs indicative of “dangerous socialistic trends.”²⁹ He regarded Democratic Party leaders as “anti-South” in their attitudes.³⁰ In accepting

the state party's nomination for the right to challenge Hill. Martin co-opted and embraced the powerful historical memory that had been the sole property of Democrats for a century. He called for "a return to the spirit of '61 – 1861, when our fathers formed a new nation" to support their principles. "God willing," Martin concluded, "we will not again be forced to take up rifle and bayonet to preserve these principles... Make no mistake, my friends, this will be a fight. The bugle call is loud and clear! The South has risen!"

Martin's attacks on Hill grew more aggressive when he turned to the issue of civil rights. Despite Hill's opposition to federal intervention into what he believed to be the rights of the states, Martin compared Hill's record to that of African American Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of New York.³¹ On the campaign trail, he referred to President Kennedy's use of federal marshals during the Freedom Riders episode as a "federal invasion of Montgomery."³² He accused Attorney General Bobby Kennedy of "tearing like a predator...at the [voter] registration laws in Alabama...."³³ In the fall, President Kennedy sent federal troops to Oxford, Mississippi, to quell the violence that had erupted when James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi. Martin called Kennedy's actions "another Reconstruction."³⁴ Martin sent a letter of support to Mississippi governor Ross Barnett, praising what he called the governor's "gallant defense of the sovereign state of Mississippi and its institutions" and pledged his support "in your fight against federal pressure and the intervention of your state's rights..."³⁵ The *Birmingham News* carried the story of Martin's defense of Barnett accompanied by a photo of Martin in front of a Confederate battle flag.³⁶ Martin declared that he was running to "keep the Kennedys from doing to Alabama what they're doing to Mississippi...."³⁷

When the votes were tallied, observers were shocked that veteran Senator and anti-civil rights Democrat Lister Hill had barely survived, eeking by with a 6,803-vote margin of victory.

Hill's support was greatest among the state's few black voters and rural whites in northern Alabama. Martin's biggest gains over totals achieved by Eisenhower in 1956 occurred in counties with large Black majorities. A majority of Alabama's white voters supported Martin.³⁸

Presidential Election of 1964: Five States for Goldwater

Martin's near-toppling of a sitting senator gave hope to the Republican Party that it was on the right track. As the decade progressed, the Democratic Party increasingly aligned itself with the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency upon Kennedy's assassination and declared his determination to become the "civil rights president." He made good on his promise. In July 1964, the president signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a broad desegregation bill.

The year 1964 promised a continuation of Republican inroads as well as a further distancing between the state Democratic Party and the National Democratic Party on the issue of civil rights. President Lyndon Johnson had become anathema to many southern white voters. Many searched for an alternative and found it in Republican Party nominee Barry Goldwater. Goldwater voted against the Civil Rights Act because he did not believe federal enforcement was possible and state and local enforcement was preferable. He insisted that "the more the Federal government has attempted to legislate morality, the more it actually has incited hatred and violence."³⁹ Goldwater received a warm welcome from white voters in Alabama and was even endorsed by the Grand Dragon of the state chapter of the Ku Klux Klan.⁴⁰ George Wallace, the state's segregationist governor, had temporarily tested the waters during the Democratic primary but eventually withdrew; recognizing Goldwater's appeal to white voters in Alabama and across the Deep South, Wallace offered himself as a possible running mate for the Arizona Senator, who politely declined. During the campaign, Goldwater embraced former Dixiecrat candidate Strom

Thurmond (now a United States Senator), who switched his party identification to Republican. On election day, Goldwater had flipped five southern states, including Alabama, where he garnered nearly 70 percent of the vote. Unlike Eisenhower, whose southern strength lay in the Upper South and in the region's metropolitan areas, Goldwater's greatest margins of victory came from counties with Black majorities, places "where any change to the racial pecking order proved the most alarming."⁴¹

Republicans expanded their activity in southern congressional races in 1964, contesting 70 of 106 congressional districts in the South, "the largest number of Republican challenges in the post-World War II period."⁴² Seven of the ten new seats won by the Republican congressional party in the nation were from the Deep South: five from Alabama alone, where Republicans captured a majority of the state's congressional delegation for the first time since the era of Reconstruction. The role of race and civil rights in this election was clear. Upon switching to the Republican Party, candidate Bill Dickinson declared, "I have joined the white man's party." He continued, "It behooves us to support those who support us and our way of life."⁴³ The other four Republican congressmen from Alabama were similarly outspoken opponents of civil rights. One said that the Civil Rights Act "paved the way for the destruction of our liberties"; another called the day that it passed "Black Friday." Goldwater's victory in the South in 1964 initiated what political scientists Earl and Merle Black call part one of the "Great White Switch," in which southern white voters began to show greater preference for Republican presidential candidates.⁴⁴

Johnson followed up his 1964 landslide victory by signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He had accomplished the passage of these two watershed pieces of legislation with almost no support from southern Democrats. "[T]he southern Democrats' traditional strategy of legislative

obstruction on civil rights legislation was finally and convincingly repudiated.” A united and bipartisan northern coalition had triumphed over southern obstruction.⁴⁵ Following passage of the Voting Rights Act, Black voter registration swelled, with new voters overwhelmingly registering as Democrats. Alabama’s first Black state legislators since Reconstruction assumed office in 1971.⁴⁶

Richard Nixon, George Wallace, and the Southern Strategy

Southern white votes were up for grabs in the 1968 presidential election as these voters turned their backs on the national Democratic Party. The passage that year of the Fair Housing Act and a U.S. Supreme Court decision that paved the way for the use of busing to achieve racial balance in public schools kept racial integration at the forefront of American politics. With staunch segregationist and American Independent Party candidate George Wallace in the race and sure to win the Deep South states, including his own, Republican candidate Richard Nixon took a more subtle, and ultimately enduring, rhetorical route to win white southern voters. Unlike Wallace, Nixon avoided supporting segregation openly. He developed what came to be known as a “southern strategy,” which encompassed promises that appealed to white southerners (and many northerners as well) while avoiding the loss of moderate Republicans in the North. Nixon established a politically safe terrain by simultaneously affirming his belief in the principles of equality while opposing the use of federal intervention to enforce compliance. A majority of white Americans had come to believe that denial of basic citizenship rights was wrong, but they were opposed to the prospect of substantial residential and educational integration imposed by the courts and by the federal regulatory bureaucracy through involuntary mechanisms, especially busing.⁴⁷ Nixon likewise adopted language that originated with Wallace, embracing a tougher

“law and order” attitude that appealed to a “silent majority” that had grown weary of civil rights demands, urban uprisings, and anti-Vietnam War protests.

Nixon carried much of the upper South, taking five states back from the Democrats. George Wallace’s independent candidacy netted five southern states (including Alabama) and stymied Nixon’s effort to replicate Goldwater’s success in the Deep South. Nixon carried through on his promises of conservative judicial appointments, relaxed enforcement of school desegregation, and opposition to busing to achieve racial balance in public schools. He also sought to weaken provisions of the Voting Rights Act.⁴⁸ Although Alabama had gone for Wallace, *The Montgomery Advertiser* appeared satisfied with the Nixon agenda, telling its readers, “Nixon Keeps His Word.”⁴⁹ In 1972, with George Wallace out of the race, Nixon won the South with 60.7 percent of vote. This election represented the first time a Republican had won the South. Voters who had supported Wallace in 1968 overwhelmingly went to Nixon.⁵⁰

Stymied in the 1970s

The success of the Republican Party at the presidential level did not immediately translate down ballot. Despite Nixon’s success in 1972, and despite the fact that the National Democratic Party by 1972 had become increasingly fractured and defined by its liberal-reform wing that was dedicated to using federal machinery to expand and secure rights for those at society’s margins, southern Democrats in the House and the Senate withstood the Goldwater and Nixon challenges, successfully asserting their independence from the national party while establishing their conservative credentials. The Democrats continued to hold majorities in both houses, so southern senators in particular, who had cultivated party and senatorial seniority, continued to secure plum committee chairmanships. Strom Thurmond’s party switching remained a singular act; most senators and representatives were unwilling to give up their power

and influence to join the minority party on a matter of political principal. As long as they could keep some distance from the increasingly liberal national party, southern Democrats were safe. In 1972, Nixon's Postmaster General, Winton "Red" Blount, challenged incumbent Senator John Sparkman, but lost badly, garnering only 33 percent of the vote. Despite having been a member of the president's cabinet, the Republican Blount received tepid support from the president, who recognized Sparkman's relatively conservative voting record as more useful to his legislative program.⁵¹

The Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon's resignation, and the Democratic Party's nomination of white southern Baptist former Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, slowed Republican gains down ballot. In Alabama specifically, the dominance and longevity of George Wallace retarded Republican development in the state. Wallace's strident racial appeals secured a base of support among white voters that Republicans found impossible to break.⁵² At the Congressional level, Alabama's delegation remained split during the 1970s and 1980s; two districts remained in Republican hands while a third, the Sixth District, went Republican in 1964 but returned to the Democratic column in 1983. The Democratic Party maintained control of the state's two senate seats throughout the decade.

Black voters entered the political process as Democrats. Democrats remained competitive into the 1980s and 1990s because of their ability to create biracial coalitions. In order to grow, the Republican Party continued to lean into its appeals to white voters. Republican state house members broke into double digits only in the early 1980s and in the state senate in the 1990s. As the parties became more racially polarized in the 1980s and 1990s, and as more white voters migrated to the Republican Party, creating coalitions became increasingly difficult.

Ronald Reagan and the Great White Switch, Part II

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984 secured the second part of the “Great White Switch,” in which a majority of the South’s white voters not only *voted* Republican for the presidency, but also *identified* as Republicans. By 1992, 43 percent of white voters in the South regarded themselves as Republican, while 42 percent considered themselves Democrats. The Republicans had become competitive by relying almost exclusively on white southern voters.

The Republican Party in the 1980s did not shy away from racial messaging. Reagan kicked off his presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, site of a horrific 1964 triple murder of civil rights activists that happened with the complicity of law enforcement. His declaration of his support for states’ rights was a not-so-subtle dog whistle to white southerners generally that his administration would not aggressively pursue remedies for racial discrimination. He promised the white voters in attendance that he intended to “restore to states and local governments the power that properly belongs to them.”⁵³ Republican strategist Lee Atwater in 1981 admitted that “The whole strategy was...based on coded racism. The whole thing.” Reagan’s vice president, George H.W. Bush, followed suit in his own presidential campaign in 1988. The infamous Willie Horton advertisement inextricably linked blackness, criminality, and liberalism – a linkage that originated with Nixon -- and hung it around the neck of Democratic Party candidate Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts.⁵⁴

Under Reagan’s leadership, the Republican Party in the 1980s pursued a conservative agenda that, while not explicitly racist, had race at its center. Republicans pursued a range of policy prescriptions that relied on the belief that the Black community is marked by higher rates of crime and illegitimacy, a weakened family structure, low achievement in educational levels, and greater demands on the welfare system. Racial attitudes among southern Republicans in

particular reflected a resistance to government assistance to Blacks as a group and applying individualistic notions and standards to the situation of Black people in this country. Republicans asserted that inequality was not the result of the legacy of slavery or the long history of racial discrimination but rather is “a matter of effort, and if Blacks worked harder...they would achieve equal status in society.”⁵⁵ Poverty and incarceration, for example, were not the result of discrimination or over-policing of communities of color, but rather the result of poor choices. Government-led redistribution of resources to address inequality was, in the minds of Republicans, an example of anti-egalitarian special preference.

The racial polarization of the parties continued. Throughout the 1980s, southern Black Democratic support ranged between 76 and 94 percent, while the percentage of Blacks identifying themselves as Republican throughout the 1980s at no time was greater than 12 percent.⁵⁶ Race remained the political dividing line between the parties. By the 1980s, southern Democratic and Republican members of congress were voting differently on civil rights issues.⁵⁷ By the end of Reagan’s presidency, approximately 70 percent of all white southern voters were supporting Republican presidential candidates. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Republicans incorporated additional conservative themes of anti-feminism and religious fundamentalism that were interwoven with racial resentment. As one scholar has noted, “even when not directly on the surface, [race] lurks beneath nearly every issue in state politics.”⁵⁸ Polls have shown that white evangelicals are disproportionately more likely to voice support for policies and politicians that have racially conservative implications. In Alabama, Republican Jeremiah Denton, a religious conservative, captured a U.S. Senate seat in 1984 but through ineptitude lost it to conservative Democrat Richard Shelby in 1986. Shelby switched his party affiliation to Republican in 1994.

Building on the position that Nixon had pioneered and Reagan had expanded, by the end of the twentieth century, race and white anxiety formed the bedrock of conservative political ideology and was embedded in conflicts surrounding taxes, spending, education, crime, and welfare, as well as the promotion of what came to be known as “family values” issues. Racial attitudes became a central characteristic of both ideology and party identification, integral to voters’ choices between Democrats and Republicans.

Summary: The Late 20th Century and the Continuing Salience of Race

By the late twentieth century, the Republican Party’s electoral base resided solidly in the southern states. This remarkable political transformation was completed over the course of half a century. Since 1980, every Republican presidential candidate has carried a majority of ex-Confederate states, and in three elections (1984, 1988, and 2004) swept the region entirely. In Congress, the GOP has won a majority of southern seats in both the House and Senate since the 1994 midterm elections. The ability to attract a large majority of white voters in southern states has become pivotal to the party’s ability to win presidential elections and electoral majorities. In order to compete, beginning in the early 1960s, the Republican Party rebranded itself as a “white party” and adopted a host of conservative policy positions that had race at their core and which allowed it to compete effectively for white southern votes.⁵⁹ Since the 1970s, Democrats have lost seats in almost every legislative election cycle, due largely to their loss of support among rural white voters. Alabama elected its last Democratic governor in 1998. Today, nearly every Democratic lawmaker is Black and every Republican lawmaker is White.⁶⁰ Only 17 percent of white voters identify as Democrats, and only 15 percent of Black voters identify as Republicans.⁶¹ As Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields argue in their recent book, *The Long Southern Strategy*, “the decision to chase white southern voters in order to build a new

Republican coalition was not only intentional, strategic, and effective, but it was also unabating.⁶² The consequence for Alabama is a politics that have become, in the words of one political scientist, “polarized and uncompetitive.”⁶³

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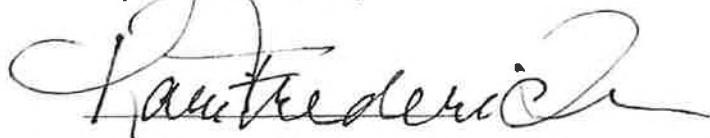
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I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct. Executed this 17th day of May 2024, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.



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